



# MEMOIRS OF MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS

by Carolly Erickson

## About the Author

- A Conversation with Carolly Erickson

## Historical Perspective

- “Back in the Day”:  
An Original Essay by the Author
- *Mary Queen of Scots*: A Time Line of Events

## Keep on Reading

- Reading Group Questions

A  
*Reading  
Group Gold  
Selection*

For more reading group suggestions,  
visit [www.readinggroupgold.com](http://www.readinggroupgold.com).



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN



## *A Conversation with Carolly Erickson*

**Why do you think Mary Stuart holds such perennial fascination for readers?**

Her story has so many compelling dimensions: tragedy, political conflict, romantic passion, even suspected crime. She reigned as Queen, she took the field in battle against her enemies, she held her own against the legions of those who were staunchly opposed to women wielding power.

Yet she was at the same time a wife and mother, a tender lover (at least, as portrayed in this historical entertainment), a beautiful woman whose cause many thousands found compelling. To us, as to her contemporaries, Mary was a woman for all seasons. Hence her enduring appeal.

**Given the circumstances of Mary's life, she must often have found herself in extreme emotional distress. Occasionally, she must have felt as if she were in the hands of a remorseless fate. Yet she coped. How do you think she managed that?**

There was an inner core of resilient strength in her that surfaced time and again. A physical and mental robustness—perhaps the same elemental robustness that caused her to survive as a tiny infant when those around her thought she would not live. When seeds are planted, and tiny plants break through the earth, some thrive while others wither. Mary seems to have had what it takes to thrive, not to succumb to fear or illness, though she certainly suffered from both.

*"Mary was a  
woman for  
all seasons."*



In Mary's time, the era of the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic revitalization and reform that is sometimes called the Counter-Reformation, a person's faith was a vital determinant of his or her path through life. What role do you think Mary's Catholicism played in shaping her life experience?

Mary's claim to the English throne, and her rivalry with Queen Elizabeth, rested on her Catholicism. English Catholics, supported by the papacy and the Catholic powers of Europe, hoped to dethrone Elizabeth and make Mary Queen of England. In Mary's personal life, as her behavior on the day she was executed makes clear, she remained a staunch daughter of the Roman church, and her unwavering faith sustained her. Historians and novelists may attempt to look into the heart and read its secrets, but they remain locked away. The depth and sincerity of Mary's Catholicism can never be truly known, only surmised from her actions.

It has been said that the authentic past is no longer accessible to those of us living in the twenty-first century, because we are doomed to view it through the narrow lens of our own life experience and through the mythic distortions of movies, epics—and the whimsical creations of superannuated novelists. What are your views on this issue?

I think the distortions caused when one age looks at another are both inevitable and fascinating. When we look back at the lives of women who lived hundreds of years ago, we are asking questions that were unknown, indeed undreamed-of, at the time. We scrutinize Mary Stuart's life looking for evidence of independence, strength of purpose, her sense of her own identity and rights. But in Mary's time no one would have envisioned these issues at all—these were issues for

*About the  
Author*

*“When we look  
back at the  
lives of women  
who lived  
hundreds of  
years ago, we  
are asking  
questions  
that were  
unknown,  
indeed  
undreamed-of,  
at the time.”*

men to grapple with, not women. Most of Mary’s female contemporaries lived short lives, in strict and often harsh subordination to men—subordination enjoined by laws and religious teachings—and inhabited a twilight mental world (one imagines) bereft of literacy or aspirations. Not that they were lacking in intellectual capability, merely that whatever capability they possessed was rarely awakened or encouraged. Discussions of the way our present-mindedness distorts our understanding of the past can make for lively talk!

**Would you like to have lived in a previous century?**

Questions like this turn history into a parlor game, and both sanitize and trivialize the past. While it is understandable that we seek diversion wherever we can find it, and reading about past times can certainly be diverting, the risk is that we will lose our authentic history while seeking to use it as entertainment.

I am well aware that in saying this I ought to admonish myself for writing historical entertainments! However, for most of my writing years I wrote nonfiction, that very demanding task of attempting to re-create the authentic past through scrutiny of existing records and through a sort of sixth sense scholars develop that (we hope) guides us and sensitizes us as we create an approximation of what really happened, and how.



## *An Original Essay by the Author*

Reading  
Group  
Gold



### **“Back in the Day”**

Are we losing the past?

Are we forgetting what made one era different from another, each century distinct?

The catchphrase “back in the day” invites a view of previous centuries as an undifferentiated, over-romanticized blur instead of an intricately evolving, multilayered story whose chapters deserve to be delineated with care.

A story, yes, but one perhaps increasingly seen as “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” Or rather, full of error. For who is there to serve as an overarching authority for all the “historical data” on the Internet—some reliable, much unreliable.

There is a careless ring to that phrase “back in the day.” A sense that what has gone before ought to be tossed aside as irrelevant to present concerns. What really counts, what really matters, is now, not then. Not back in the day.

Present-mindedness is alluring; it smacks of the fresh, the new, the current—and therefore the best. Surely there is virtue in discarding what has become outmoded and stale, what might drag us down in our quest for progress.

We rejoice, after all, in having left so many wrongs behind: the evils of legal inequality, slavery, patriarchal attitudes that hampered women and prevented our advancement. The multiple sins of life back in the day send a frisson of horror down our liberated spines. Who would willingly reenter a world in which life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,” as the very present-minded Thomas Hobbes

*About the  
Author*

*"We yearn for  
the unfolding  
story of who we  
are and where  
we have come  
from across the  
generations."*

wrote more than three centuries ago.

Yet Hobbes, and his educated contemporaries, were very aware of the great time line of Western history, as then envisioned: from the stirrings of classical rationalism in the Athens of the fifth century, before Christ; to the spread of Roman law and eventually of Christian faith and values in the later centuries of the ancient world; to the long medieval twilight to the dawn of the Age of Reason and the rise of critical thought.

The past, for Hobbes, was a cautionary tale, useful, if in no other way, for showing what to avoid. The present-mindedness of our own time is of a different order; it seeks to discard the outlived centuries without paying them the slightest heed.

A hundred years from now (assuming the doomsayers predicting the end of the world in 2012 are wrong), our era may be thrown out as useless. By then, of course, the phrase "back in the day" will have been long out of fashion: a quaint epitaph for a forgotten past.

Time, some physicists now propose, may itself be an illusion. We may in actuality occupy a timeless multiverse in which past and future meld into an eternal present. If so, I may be occupying the same space as Julius Caesar and Mae West—to conjure an image of an improbable couple.

"The day," such as it is, may go on forever, making phrases about the past meaningless.



Confusion beckons; can madness be far behind? For surely, in some guise or other, sequentialness (is that a word?) is a basic human need. We crave to orient ourselves in midcourse of our common journey from ape through sentient thinker through Caesarian conquests to Hobbesian rationalism to—Mae West and beyond.

Even if “back in the day” turns out to be “full circle,” we will nonetheless yearn for the lost centuries, the long and slow slip of time, the ancestors and the memories, the unfolding story of who we are and where we have come from across the generations. And we will mourn the loss.

*Historical  
Perspective*



## *A Time Line of Events*

December 8, 1542	Birth of Mary Stuart
December 14, 1542	Infant Mary becomes Queen of Scotland
September 9, 1543	Mary is crowned Queen
April 24, 1558	Mary marries the French dauphin Francis
August 19, 1561	Widowed Mary returns to Scotland
July 29, 1565	Mary marries Lord Darnley
March 9, 1566	Murder of David Riccio
June 19, 1566	Birth of Mary's son James, future James VI of Scotland, James I of England
February 9, 1567	Death of Lord Darnley
February 8, 1587	Mary is beheaded





## Reading Group Questions

1. Why do you think Mary Queen of Scots is such an iconic historical figure? What is it about her that continues to fascinate lovers of history?
2. Why do you think Mary had such a difficult time ruling over her Scottish subjects?
3. Fate, enchantments, and the power of the otherworldly lay over the characters in this novel. To what extent do you believe fate rules our destinies? How do you imagine sixteenth-century attitudes on this issue differed from those of our more secular age?
3. In the novel, Mary regrets that she did not return to France after escaping from Lochleven. What might the course of her life been if she had returned to France?
4. Had Mary become Queen of England, do you imagine that she would have been swiftly dethroned by a popular rebellion?
5. Mary's nemesis John Knox wrote a treatise condemning the "Monstrous Regiment [Rule] of Women." In your view, have women rulers, over the centuries, proven him wrong in his condemnation? Or have women and men been equally adept (or inexperienced) at wielding power?
6. In the novel, Mary says that she "was not born to be obscure, to live a hidden, quiet life." "I had the blood of kings in my veins," she says, "and there was more for me to do in the world." Was this conviction her blessing—or her curse?
7. Mary asserts at one point that Queen Elizabeth, for all her power and cleverness, never found "the secret of happiness." Do you believe that Mary herself found it? Have you?

Reading  
Group  
Gold



Reading  
Group  
Questions